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Stratford and the Lees

Virginia Home of the Family Which Took a Leading Part in Wresting a New Nation From the Wilderness and in Establishing Its Independence Has Become a Memorial

By Burton J. Hendrick

Stratford Hall, colonial home of the Lees of Virginia, is being dedicated as a national shrine on Oct. 12. This estate, birthplace of several outstanding figures in American history, will reproduce, when its restoration is completed, a typical eighteenth-century plantation, with its arts, trades and industries being carried on as in the days of old. This article has been written specially for THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR by the author of "The Lees of Virginia," just published.

IN 1716 THOMAS LEE, grandson of that Richard Lee who founded the famous Virginia family, paid a visit to his relatives in England. One of the most interesting places to the Lees of that generation was the village of Stratford-Langton, a suburb of London near the River Thames, three or four miles from the metropolis. The little, onetime ecclesiastical town had pious associations for the Lees; here the first Richard, after accumulating a substantial fortune in Virginia tobacco, had set up as an English country gentleman, become an "Esquire," and planned to establish an English line.

For years Richard Lee, who made almost as frequent transatlantic voyages as a modern American captain of industry, alternated between his villa at Stratford-Langton and his Virginia home on the shores of the Chesapeake; Virginia and America seemed to exercise constant pulls on his allegiance and affection; for a decade there was no certainty whether he would remain an Englishman or cast in his fortunes with the new nation in the American forests. Finally, however, about 1663, he abandoned England for good, provided, in his will, for the sale of his Essex estate, embarked, with his wife and family of eight children, for Virginia, and passed on there the following year.

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For more than a quarter of a century Richard Lee had been a prosperous Virginia planter; a large part of his time had been spent on the York and the Chesapeake; his Virginia holdings of 15,000 acres made him, on the day of his passing, the richest Virginian of his time; he had served in all the important civic posts of Virginia, having been a member of the Royal Council, Secretary of State, and second man in importance to Sir William Berkeley, twice royal governor; that Richard Lee should conclude that the future of his descendants properly lay with Virginia rather than England not only accorded with the fitness of things but with his own spirit, which was forward, adventurous, pioneering, gifted with leadership and devoted to the new political and social order growing up along the Potomac and the James.

Yet the sentimental attachment between the Virginia Lees and this English town of Stratford was strong. That Thomas Lee, on his English visit of 1716—in his twenty-sixth year—paid frequent visits to his grandfather's old home may be taken for granted.

Though Thomas was only the fifth son of the second Richard, he was the most enterprising and ablest of his line—in many ways the greatest Virginian of his day. His fate was that of younger sons of eighteenth-century Virginia; he inherited little land, but, by his own native genius, became a rich man, and the founder of the most distinguished branch of the Lees. His marriage to Hannah Harrison Ludwell enhanced his standing, for she was the daughter of great Virginia clans—one that has produced two Presidents of the United States, and that, in early colonial Virginia, produced several leaders whose fame is part of Virginia's glory. In all probability it was the vigor, intellectual force, talent for public life, independence of restraint of Hannah Ludwell's forbears that largely explains the genius of the Stratford Lees.

When Thomas and Hannah built their home on the Potomac, overlooking Hollis Cliffs, they symbolized the connection between the old English estate on the Thames and their new American "seat" by giving it the name of Stratford. The mansion was the most pretentious that had been constructed in the region. Wood was still—and for a long period afterward—the usual material for Potomac houses; but more than a million bricks, all baked on the premises, went to making the new Lee home.

At the time this section represented Virginia's farthest west. The architecture of Stratford was and is strange. It is in the form of the letter "H," with two pointed roofs, chimney clusters, and with something resembling a promenade between. Its living apartments practically all are on the second floor, with stone steps giving access to the ground below. The brick walls are two feet and more thick, by virtue of which Stratford, almost alone of the Potomac houses, has survived intact to the present day. All of these things have led many to believe that the house was not only a home, but a fortress, that its purpose was not only to shelter the large family of Thomas and Hannah Lee, but to provide a refuge from Indian raids.

The outward aspect, it must be admitted, suggests these uses. The place is solid, grim, lacking in architectural grace, almost defiant in its isolation; it is, indeed, the most characteristic of Virginia houses, suggesting in every line the stoutness of its inhabitants—that mixture of frontier determination and that insistence on the substantial virtues with that aspiration for the finer sides of human intercourse which were the prevailing Virginia virtues of the time.

Yet Stratford was no fortress; its architecture, which so puzzles present-day observers, though it was virtually unknown in America, was not unprecedented in England. And this fact brings to mind again the visit of Thomas Lee to England and his pilgrimages to old Richard's seat at Stratford-Langton. For the most conspicuous building in this community bears so close a resemblance to the American Stratford that, in all probability, it gave Thomas the model for his Virginia establishment.

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This was Ham House, constructed in the time of Queen Elizabeth, and the home of a succession of distinguished Englishmen. This mansion is no longer standing, but surviving prints disclose that its main lines were those of Stratford on the Potomac. It was built in the shape of the letter "H"; it had the two wings, with hall between, culminating in the two pointed roofs; it lacked, indeed, the chimney clusters, and its entrances were level with the ground, but in its outward appearance the two structures are essentially the same.

When, a decade after his return from the English visit, Thomas Lee, feeling that his increasing wealth and his rising rank in Virginia political life demanded a more imposing abiding place than his father's wooden home, Mount Pleasant, selected this lofty ridge on the Potomac, would it not seem natural that he should reproduce the house by the Thames which had so moved his aspiration as a young man, just as he found its name in that ancient English village so closely identified with the Lees?

The fame of this Thomas Lee has suffered most undeserved diminution, and Stratford today is chiefly celebrated as the birthplace of Robert E. Lee, who was not a descendant of Thomas, but of his brother Henry. To a great extent the veneration in which the Confederate General is held in all parts of the United States, South and North alike, and the role he played in one of the great crises of American history have obscured the splendor of the Stratford Lees.

Now that the Potomac house has become a national shrine, it is appropriate to recall the statesmen and soldiers who made it their home, long before Robert E. Lee had been born in the historic East Room. As far back as 1779, 82 years before the Civil War, John Adams said that the "family of Lee has more men of merit in it than any other family"; it was the Revolutionary Lees of Stratford that he had in mind.

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The founder of these Lees, Thomas, is one of the first Americans—one of the first colonials, that is, whose mind had a continental sweep, reaching beyond the borders of his native Virginia, stretching into the wilderness north of the Ohio and west to the Mississippi. That this section of the country, today the home of 25,000,000 persons and one of the world's greatest industrial and agricultural empires, is part of the American domain, is, in considerable measure, owing to the foresight and enterprise of Thomas Lee. In his youth and early manhood it was undisputed territory of France, but his energies were concentrated on making it part of the British Empire, the seat of English-speaking peoples, the home of a great train of immigrants, whom he proposed to bring, not only from Great Britain, but from Germany and other European countries.

When Thomas became Acting Governor of Virginia—the Governor was always a royal appointee, sent from England—his reports are full of accounts of this western country, urging the home government to extend its influence and proprietorship into the fruitful region.

"The French are intruders into this America," he wrote, showing that, in political thinking, he was the legitimate son of Britain; he insisted that the true borders of Virginia—that is, English America—extended to the Pacific Ocean, "including California"; whatever the justice of this tall claim may have been at the time, as prophecy it is certainly entitled to respect.

But Thomas Lee not only constantly advocated American rights in the Northwest Territory, but took the first positive steps to realization. He was chairman of the commission which, in 1744, negotiated the Treaty of Lancaster—a treaty by which the Six Nations transferred all their rights in the Northwest to Virginia. Upon this document, and a few phrases in the Peace of Utrecht, rested Great Britain's claims to this vast expanse—claims ultimately made good by Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham.

Thomas Lee organized the first Ohio Company in 1748, sent Christopher Gist to establish the first American trading post at a site which is now the city of Cumberland, and thus marked out the first trail across the Alleghanies—the trail that provided Braddock's road to the present region of Pittsburgh and became the line of march of the first great emigration into the western lands. This interest in the western

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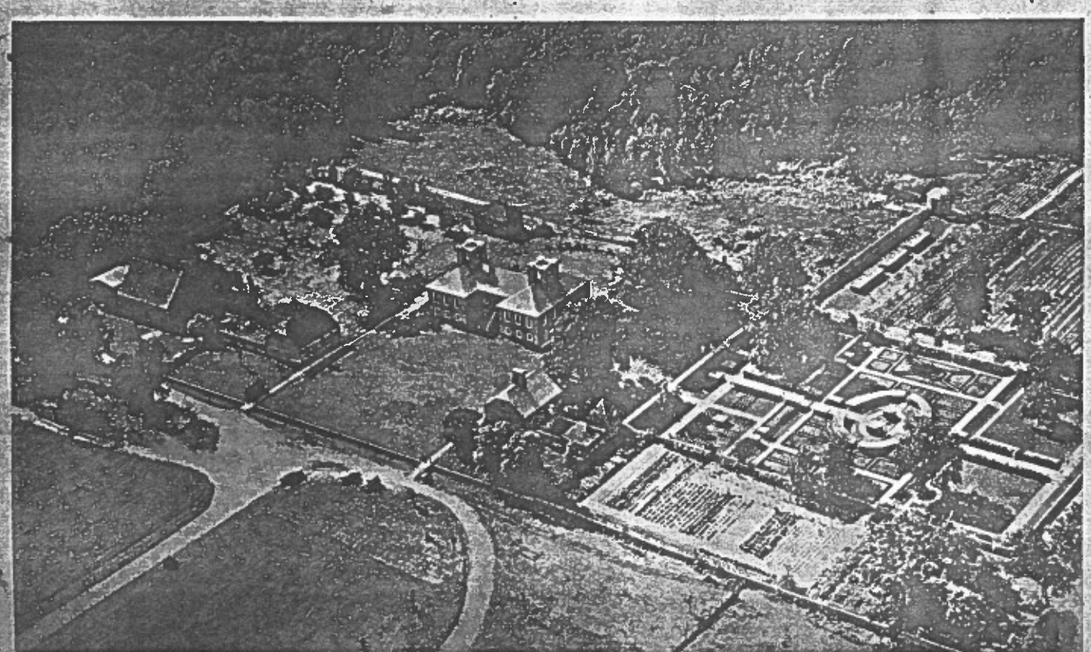

THE LEE ESTATE IN VIRGINIA

This View From an Airplane Shows the Main House, Curiously Designed After a Model in England, the Outbuildings and the Formal Gardens, All of Which Have Been Restored to Their Original Conditions.

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country Thomas transmitted to his sons, all of whom were closely associated with Washington in his several enterprises for western exploration and settlement.

Thomas Lee, as "President of Virginia," a title that came as chairman of the Virginia Council, manifested all those personal qualities—of leadership, energy, independence, allegiance to his native soil—that prepared the way for the Revolution.

Stratford is a monument to the efforts that resulted in America's western empire, and that is the estate's first claim to the veneration of Americans. But it has others. It is a monument, not only to American expansion, but to American independence. Other American parents have produced greater children than any of the six sons of Thomas Lee and Hannah Ludwell of Stratford, but it would be difficult to name any progenitors who have given to America so many descendants of first-rate quality. All of their six sons reached high position.

* * *

Their first son, Philip Ludwell, who became Counselor, acquired his honors as a matter of inheritance, but all his five brothers attained distinction through their own talents.

Thomas Ludwell Lee, the second son, was not only one of the best-loved Virginians of his day—"the darling of all Virginia," John Adams called him—but was a conspicuous Revolutionary patriot and one of the chief influences in lining up Virginia for the Declaration of Independence—this at a time when the colony was not unanimous for that daring pronouncement. As a member of the Virginia Committee of Public Safety, he did much to put the Dominion in a state of defense and protect it from the ravages of Lord Dunmore. Had Thomas Ludwell not passed on two years after the outbreak of the Revolution, he would have been a great figure in the early days of the republic.

To relate the services of his four younger brothers—Richard Henry Lee, Francis Lightfoot Lee, William Lee, and Arthur Lee—would be to tell a large part of the Revolutionary story. Richard Henry and Francis Lightfoot were members of the Continental Congress and signers of the Declaration of Independence, and Richard Henry was one of the most powerful forces in the early days of the struggle.

* * *

Unlike his fellow artistocrats from the James River and other sections, Richard Henry Lee was an early American patriot and advocate of independence. In the days when even Washington was firm in his loyalty to Great Britain, Richard Henry was working for separation. It was the alliance established between Richard Henry Lee and John and Samuel Adams that brought about the Declaration of Independence. These able parliamentarians started the movement in late 1775, when Congress was, by a great majority, opposed to independence and when most of the colonies had sent delegates to Philadelphia instructed to vote against it; the skill and persistence with which these men conducted their campaign is one of the most stirring episodes in American political life.

Most Americans think that America declared its independence on July 4, 1776, the date of Jefferson's declaration—but the real date was July 2, two days before the day officially recognized as the great American anniversary. It was on July 2, 1776, that Congress adopted the resolution declaring that the United Colonies were, and of right ought to be, free and independent states and that all connection between them and the British crown was, and ought to be, totally dissolved.

* * *

The original manuscript of this resolution is preserved in the Library of Congress. It is in the handwriting of Richard Henry Lee. It was he who wrote it and introduced it on June 7. The seconder was John Adams. It was this vote that made America a free nation; the Declaration of Jefferson, adopted two days afterward, was intended as a justification of the act.

While the three Lees—Thomas Ludwell, Richard Henry and Francis Lightfoot—were working for American independence at home, two other remarkable brothers, Arthur and William Lee, were working to the same end in the courts of Europe. Arthur is one of the most complex characters of the Revolutionary period. He was a man of cantankerous, difficult temperament, egotistical, haughty, tactless, vain and quarrelsome; at the same he he was extremely able, a scholar, friend of the greatest Europeans of his time, and a zealous patriot. So far, historians and biographers have emphasized his more disagreeable qualities and given slight recognition to his solid contributions to the revolutionary cause. But his work, especially in the early days of the struggle, was of vast importance.

* * *

In December, 1775, the Continental Congress made Arthur Lee secret agent of the colonies in London. Here his energies were chiefly directed to securing the aid of France in the Revolution. He formed a close association with Beaumarchais, who then had the ear of Vergennes, and through him, of the French King, Louis XVI.

Thus the rather ugly pile of Stratford deserves a niche all its own in the American story. Its later glory as the home of Light Horse Harry, the birthplace of his son, Robert E. Lee, were only appropriate sequels to the contributions it had made in the establishing of the American nation. The place passed out of the hands of the Lees in 1828, as a result of the misdeeds of the last master, son of Light Horse Harry and half-brother of Robert E. Lee. For a century it led a rather neglected career. Fortunately Thomas Lee, its builder, had constructed it so substantially that it has not suffered seriously. It is a matter for congratulation that the building has been saved and will be preserved as a memorial, not only to Robert E. Lee, but to the family that did so much in laying the foundation for the United States.

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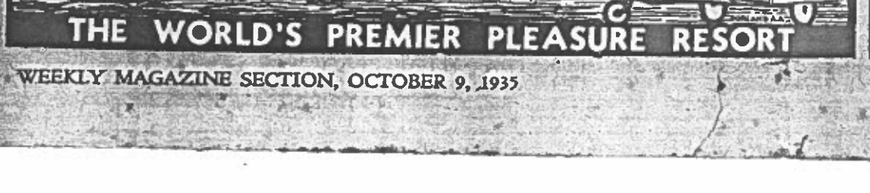

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